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The Second Coming

Doug Ramspeck

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Abstract
The boy's earliest memory is of his father beating a man nearly to death on the street outside their apartment building in West Chicago. The beating itself is a little fuzzy in the boy's memory, but he does remember clearly—or believes he remembers—the blood on his father's hands and shirt, the injured man on his back and moaning on the sidewalk. Apparently the man had permanent brain damage from the beating, and the boy's father went to prison because of it.

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Fiction by Doug Ramspeck

The boy's earliest memory is of his father beating a man nearly to death on the street outside their apartment building in West Chicago. The beating itself is a little fuzzy in the boy's memory, but he does remember clearly—or believes he remembers—the blood on his father's hands and shirt, the injured man on his back and moaning on the sidewalk. Apparently the man had permanent brain damage from the beating, and the boy's father went to prison because of it. It was just as well, the boy's mother said. The family was better off. There were three children total, and their mother worked as a waitress and sometimes cleaned motel rooms and once worked for a week at a camera shop as a cashier. She made a point of telling her children again and again that their father was no good, that he was evil, that he could pretend to be charming but it was all an act. She told them that if he ever got out of prison they should have nothing to do with him, under no circumstances. It was the one certain truth of the family, the only thing all of them accepted without bickering or strife, and it followed them to different neighborhoods in the city, through the hard times of never having enough money. In the boy's mind his father was a great brute of a man, not even fully human, a strange beast. In truth he couldn't recall what his father looked like beyond the blood on his hands and shirt, beyond the way he'd stood over that hopeless man on the sidewalk, kicking him. It was a terrible memory, and the boy assumed that his father was the stuff of nightmares. He also knew full well, though, that life with his mother was difficult, especially after she came down with diabetes. She was tired all the time now but needed to work longer hours because of the medical bills, which at times she couldn't pay. In April that year she didn't have enough money

for rent, and it seemed likely they would be evicted soon if that didn't change. The boy didn't want to live on the street. His mother took the family to the church on Newton that Sunday so they could pray, and what the boy prayed for was that Jesus would pay the rent for them, at least for a little while, and that the diabetes would disappear. Jesus cured the blind and the lepers and the people who couldn't walk, after all. Diabetes seemed a simple matter next to things like that. Surely it was easier than walking on water or bringing the dead back to life. And it wasn't even four days after those prayers—the boy was leaving the school yard—when a man approached him. The man had long Jesus hair. He was skinny and looked old. His teeth were bad, and his breath smelled. He told the boy he was his father, which at first the boy didn't understand. Because the man looked like Jesus, the boy wondered if he meant that he was a priest or maybe God the Father, and that's what he wanted to be called. But the man started saying that he was out of prison now and knew he wasn't supposed to see his kids, but he just couldn't help himself. He told the boy he wanted forgiveness. He told the boy he loved him. The boy, of course, was scared now—he looked at his father's hands for blood, his father's shirt for blood—but then the man handed him some money from his pocket, a handful of wadded-up and dirty bills. Only later did the boy count the bills and realize it was nearly two hundred dollars, enough to keep the landlord at bay for another month or at least part of one. It was a miracle, the boy knew, but now he had a dilemma. He went home and waited for his mother to return from work. He was sitting at the kitchen table when she came home, and, as usual, she seemed to know that something was wrong. When she gave him a strict look, he couldn't decide whether he was better off telling her that the money had come from his father or from Jesus. He kept going back and forth in this thinking, but then his mother grew impatient and started quizzing him, so he quickly showed her the money and told her it was Jesus who gave it to him. That seemed safer, in the end. It turned out his mother beat him for lying, but in any case the boy thought it was the wise choice, and she did take the money to give to the landlord. As the years passed the boy decided it probably really had been Jesus after all, had been a miracle, even though his mother had her leg amputated not long after that because of her illness, even though his younger sister died from being hit by a bus in the street, even though they did live for a time in a shelter and almost never had enough money to keep their bellies full.

Doug Ramspeck is the author of five poetry collections. His most recent book, *Original Bodies*, was selected for the Michael Waters Poetry Prize and is forthcoming by *Southern Indiana Review Press*. Two earlier books also received awards: *Mechanical Fireflies* (Barrow Street Press Poetry Prize), and *Black Tupelo Country* (John Ciardi Prize, University of Missouri-Kansas City). Individual poems have appeared in journals

that include *Kenyon Review*, *Slate*, *Southern Review*, *Georgia Review*, *AGNI*, and *Alaska Quarterly Review*.